

**FRANKLIN: TRAGIC HERO OF POLAR NAVIGATION.** Andrew Lambert. 2009. London: Faber and Faber. xii + 428 pp., illustrated, hard cover. ISBN 978-0-571-23160-7. UK £20, USA \$32.50, Canada \$39 (Title in the USA: *The gates of hell: Sir John Franklin's tragic quest for the north west passage*). doi:10.1017/S0032247410000173

The subtitle of this book suggests that it is a sympathetic new biography of Sir John Franklin. Yet Andrew Lambert begins with a sensationalised account of the infamous resort to cannibalism by Franklin's men, which took place in the year after the explorer's own death. 'British sailors carefully and deliberately used their knives, vital symbols of their profession, to strip the flesh from men who had been their friends,' he recounts. 'To remove the maximum amount of flesh they cut the bodies into joints . . . They cracked open the larger bones to extract the marrow. . . . They took the heads, ripped off the jaw bones and stove in the bases of the skulls to get at the nutritious and easily digested brain' (page 1). How can a writer who chooses to focus on the details of such an episode, and to describe them in the most lurid terms possible, consider the leader of this disastrous expedition a tragic hero? Lambert offers the puzzled reader no explanations. Instead, he plunges into a section titled 'The pursuit of science', which begins with the unexpected statement that the Franklin tragedy 'had its origins in the Peruvian Andes' (page 7).

Readers hoping for more of the dramatic prose found in the prologue have to wait until the very end of the book, when Lambert once again returns to the cannibalism theme. The main text is divided into four parts. In the first, Lambert argues that Humboldtian science, and especially magnetic science, was the true driving force behind the search for the northwest passage during the early nineteenth century. In the second, he depicts Franklin as a key player in this ongoing magnetic quest, even during his time as governor of Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania). The next part deals with Franklin's third expedition, which, Lambert avers, was not aimed at the discovery of the passage at all. Instead, Franklin's main goal was to carry out observations at the north magnetic pole. The final section describes the commemoration of Franklin's life and achievements. Though Lambert's deep admiration for Sir John is evident throughout the book, he bitterly decries the efforts to perpetuate the explorer's memory by Lady Franklin and her allies. In Lambert's view, when Franklin's family and friends described him first and foremost as a geographical discoverer and exalted the northwest passage as his goal, they distorted his legacy. Inevitably, later generations found little to admire in the false heroism of the image thus created.

By the end of the book, the link between cannibalism and Lambert's main theme has finally become clear, though it is a strange and extremely tenuous one. According to him, cannibalism and magnetic science had one thing in common: the Victorian public was determined to ignore the place of them both in Franklin's last expedition. For Lambert, the 'heroic' quest for the northwest passage was an illusion, made necessary by the public's demand for tales of adventurous exploits in new lands. Franklin is a tragic figure because he had to disguise his true, lofty scientific aims behind the tawdry veil of geographical discovery, and because he has continued to be falsely represented as a quixotic explorer rather than as a serious scientific researcher. By offering a different image, Lambert clearly hopes

to restore Franklin to his place in the Arctic pantheon. In his version, the true villain is the British public, and so Franklin cannot be held responsible for his followers' final desperate acts.

Quite obviously, the contents of the book are bound to surprise readers attracted by the opening and closing sections, and it is difficult not to suspect that Lambert has employed a 'bait and switch' strategy in order to increase the sales of his volume. Potential buyers, skimming through the first and last pages in a bookstore, might well anticipate a colourful, vividly written account similar to Pierre Berton's *The Arctic grail* (Berton 1988) or Fergus Fleming's *Barrow's boys* (Fleming 1998), both of which portray Franklin as an amiable fool and blunderer. Having lured these readers in, Lambert can attempt to convince them that Franklin has always been misunderstood, even by his own wife and the adoring public of his day.

However, such readers will be very likely to abandon the book halfway through. Unlike Berton and Fleming, Lambert has little flair for storytelling. While *Franklin: tragic hero* offers specialists some interesting insights based on new primary source research, there are long stretches without anything in the way of gripping narrative interest. The book appears to have been hastily written and poorly edited; as a result, there are many sloppy and confusing passages. Lambert often seems to assume that his audience will already possess considerable knowledge of Arctic history and biography. For example, such statements as the one that Franklin's 'hitherto single-minded evangelical Christianity was tempered by his [first] wife's determination to continue writing' (page 35) are incomprehensible to anyone who has not read several other Franklin books. With regard to Franklin's decision to accept the governorship of Van Diemen's Land, Lambert wonders rhetorically whether this major career move was 'anything more than little Johnny Franklin trying to fill his elder brother's boots' (page 58). Since Sir Willingham Franklin has received only a very brief previous mention (page 22), and his relationship with John has not been described, the remark is bound to puzzle the great majority of readers. Francis Crozier fell in love with Franklin's niece Sophia Cracroft when they first met in Van Diemen's Land, but she did not return his feelings. Lambert omits to describe this episode at the proper place in his narrative, but he later makes an unexplained reference to Crozier's thwarted passion (page 161). Then there are the passages that simply make no sense at all, such as the statement that Richard Collinson's search expedition spent three 'torrid winters' in the far north (page 229).

Arctic specialists, even those who agree that Franklin's current low reputation is undeserved, are unlikely to be convinced by Lambert's main arguments. His contention that Sir Joseph Banks and the Royal Society, rather than John Barrow, played the leading role in the decision to renew Arctic exploration in 1818 is plausible enough, and indeed the same idea was put forward very convincingly by Michael Bravo in his 1992 doctoral thesis (Bravo 1992). Unfortunately, neither Bravo nor Lambert is able to prove this theory through primary source evidence. Without such evidence, it is impossible to determine Barrow's exact role. While it probably fell short of the leading part he always claimed for himself, Lambert has no justification for reducing him to little more than a 'spin-doctor' (page 14). Moreover, Lambert describes Banks's project as one that 'gripped' the entire scientific community (page 30), ignoring the opposition to it led by John Leslie of Edinburgh University.

At this point in the Arctic story, Lieutenant John Franklin appeared on the scene, ‘calm, capable, and intellectually sophisticated’. On his first overland expedition, Lambert insists, Franklin ‘was not sent to explore’ (page 31). As proof, he cites the sections in Franklin’s orders instructing him to make magnetic observations. But the very first section named geographical discovery as the main purpose, and Franklin himself clearly believed that his primary mission was to explore. ‘My instructions,’ he wrote in his narrative, ‘in substance, informed me that the main object of the Expedition was that of determining the latitudes and longitudes of the Northern Coast of North America, and the trending of that Coast from the Mouth of the Copper-Mine River to the eastern extremity of that Continent . . . I was to be very careful to ascertain correctly the latitude and longitude of every remarkable spot upon our route, and of all the bays, harbours, rivers, headlands, etc., that might occur along the Northern Shore of North America’ (Franklin 1823: xi–xii). In the years after his two overland expeditions, Franklin’s friendships with scientific men and his continuing interest in magnetic questions (hardly unusual for a naval officer) are taken as certain proof that magnetism was the consuming passion of his life. But, Lambert notes ominously, geographical discovery in the Arctic had more appeal for Franklin’s second wife, Jane Griffin, who was determined to see him add to his fame (pages 44, 54, 58, 93, 151).

Just as the Franklins are about to depart for Van Diemen’s Land, the flow of the narrative is interrupted by a chapter on scientific societies and on the careers of Roderick Murchison, Edward Sabine, and Francis Beaufort. Lambert describes Sabine, a key promoter of magnetic research, as a ‘ruthless, relentless and remorseless’ character. Through the British Association for the Advancement of Science (BAAS), he and Murchison exerted ‘a powerful grip on British science’ (pages 66–67). Meanwhile, Beaufort worked at the Admiralty, where he quietly promoted magnetic work ‘without putting anything on paper’ (page 69). Like Barrow, Beaufort wanted to see the renewal of the search for the northwest passage, but he realised that ‘[i]t would require a high-profile international scientific “crusade” to reopen the Arctic mission’ (page 72). Magnetism, Lambert argues, provided such a crusade. He then gives a brief history of magnetic science. Following this ten page interlude, Lambert’s argument is suddenly reversed: the Royal Society and the BAAS wanted a scientific expedition, but, ‘[a]s magnetic science was never going to hit the headlines, the Passage became the cover story.’ Acting as the scientists’ ‘mole’, Beaufort supported the idea of a new Arctic expedition at the Admiralty. Geographical discovery would ostensibly be the object of this new expedition, but in fact the true aim was to make observations near the magnetic pole. Then the Arctic project was put on hold when, through complicated machinations, Sabine successfully arranged for an Antarctic expedition led by James Clark Ross (page 89).

Part Two opens with a long description of Franklin’s career as a colonial governor, much of it interesting enough in itself, but irrelevant to the theme of science. The section on the Hobart magnetic observatory and Franklin’s involvement in James Ross’s scientific programme, on the other hand, is fascinating. According to Lambert, Franklin was given command of the 1845 Arctic expedition primarily because of his role in this work. The cover story about the northwest passage ‘satisfied public curiosity, providing a simple mission concept that all could understand – unlike the tedious, unromantic slog of magnetic observations’ (page 142). It also pleased Barrow, but

Franklin ‘shared Sabine’s magnetic agenda, and understood that Barrow’s utility was limited by his failure to grasp the primacy of science’ (page 143). Therefore, Barrow’s role in the planning was ‘marginal’ (page 153). As for Franklin’s official orders, ‘While they state that the main object was the completion of the North West Passage, the weight of words makes it clear that magnetic science dominated the mission’ (page 158).

This interpretation of the orders is bound to be controversial. The number of words dedicated to magnetic observations and other scientific matters cannot outweigh the clear statement that the northwest passage was the main objective. Admiralty orders were meant to be interpreted literally and strictly. But, according to Lambert, it was no accident that Franklin’s ships ended up near King William Island, the location of the north magnetic pole (page 164). Sir John’s mission was not a quixotic one, for ‘the Victorians were not so foolhardy as to risk two ships and 129 men in pursuit of a geographical curiosity. Instead his expedition was designed to address a high-profile scientific agenda’ (page 167). It is not clear here exactly who ‘the Victorians’ were: though Lambert argues that Franklin and his fellow polar scientists were far too sophisticated to care about the passage, Barrow, the government, and the mass of the public all apparently required such a lure.

When it comes to the Franklin search, Lambert is unable to explain why, if King William Island was the expedition’s true, though secret, destination, a relief expedition was not promptly sent to search it. He admits that Sabine (like many Arctic experts) advised a search of Wellington Channel, which led away from Franklin’s alleged destination, the magnetic pole (page 181). Surely not even the most ruthless and relentless man could have betrayed his friends in this way without a powerful motive, but Lambert offers no explanation of why Sabine might have done so. Then on the next page, the Wellington Channel idea becomes a ‘straw man’ fabricated by John Barrow Junior; for what purpose, Lambert does not say. He argues that before his departure, Franklin had ‘categorically rejected’ Wellington Channel as a possible route, which simply is not true. In the letter which Lambert quotes as proof of this assertion, Franklin wrote that he might try Wellington Channel as a last resort in the unlikely event that he found it free of ice (pages 182, 163). As the record discovered by Leopold McClintock’s expedition proves, Franklin did in fact find Wellington Channel open, and he did try it, though ultimately he was forced to turn back. Wellington Channel might have turned out to be part of the northwest passage, but there was no reason for Franklin to go there if magnetic observations were his real purpose.

The account of the Franklin search is the most confused and unconvincing portion of the book. Lambert simply shrugs that it is ‘striking how quickly the purpose of Franklin’s mission was forgotten’, casting the main blame on Lady Franklin and Beaufort, who is described as a ‘deskbound polar innocent’ (page 189). Jane Franklin and the naval officers who supported her efforts ‘turned the search into a chivalric endeavour, a modern quest for the Holy Grail’, which ‘was a powerful, appealing image, but it had nothing to do with Franklin’ (page 202). Foolish, feminine, ambitious Jane (Lambert usually refers to her by her first name only) simply did not understand her husband’s true nature or motives. With misdirected energy, she masterminded an equally misdirected search; opportunistic scientists, including Sabine, participated for their own ends, while disavowing any responsibility for the tragic outcome of the expedition. As a result, ‘lies and half truths quickly piled up around the Franklin story’ (page 244). Leaving aside Lambert’s

condescending attitude towards Lady Franklin (which women readers may well find objectionable and even offensive), how likely is it that a man who loved and trusted his wife would have said nothing whatever to her about his expedition's true purpose?

Jane Franklin comes in for yet more barbed criticism in the final portion of the book. Determined 'to rewrite the past', she insisted that her husband should be acknowledged as the discoverer of the northwest passage. The result of her efforts was the statue in Waterloo Place. Victorian society thus 'lost sight of the greater man: John Franklin, navigator, scientist and humanitarian, was crushed beneath the granite and bronze of an ill-conceived outsized effigy' (pages 288, 295). Misled by this heroic myth, Robert Falcon Scott and his comrades went to their unnecessary deaths in the Antarctic, and thousands more Englishmen willingly volunteered for the carnage of the First World War. Later students of Arctic history, equally blinkered, 'have been unable to explain the otherwise astonishing fact that Britain willingly spent an imperial fortune to solve a minor geographical curiosity of no possible economic benefit' (page 301).

Lambert ridicules the historians who have explained the Franklin disaster as the result of lead poisoning or botulism. Dismissing Owen Beattie's discovery of high lead levels in the bodies of Franklin's men (Beattie and Geiger 1987), and ignoring the highly speculative nature of his own theories, he remarks piously that 'the most plausible explanations are the ones that require no flights of imagination, speculation or guesswork, and do not stray beyond the evidence. Historians should check that their evidence would stand up in a court of law' (page 344). Then he offers his own reconstruction of the expedition's tragic end. In the days immediately following the abandonment of the ships, the officers were able to 'maintain the illusion of normality, hope and progress.' But only a few officers remained, and they soon died. Without them, according to Lambert, 'discipline weakened. With their death[s] went any hope of escape: only the officers possessed the navigational skills to find the way out. Once the men realised their fate the bounds of civilised behaviour were loosed' (page 345). Needless to say, this version of events rests entirely on speculation. There is no proof as to where or when most of the officers died, and such proof as does exist runs counter to Lambert's claims. He states that the cannibalism began at Terror Bay in May 1848, but

the skeleton of Lieutenant Henry Le Vesconte was found near the mouth of the Pfeffer River, well beyond Terror Bay on the line of the last march (Owen 1978: 418, 421–422). Therefore, there is no way of telling whether the men who resorted to cannibalism were officers or sailors or a combination of the two.

Why Lambert should wish to convince his audience that no officers participated in the cannibalism, and why he believes so passionately that Franklin the magnetic scientist is an inherently more admirable figure than Franklin the geographical discoverer, remains obscure. At times his book begins to resemble the work of such Arctic cranks as Noel Wright, whose *Quest for Franklin* (1959) also purported to reveal the long neglected key to the Arctic mystery. Unquestionably, Franklin and his fellow Arctic officers took a very serious interest in science, but there is no reason to believe that they valued it above geographical discovery, either for its intrinsic worth or as a means of advancing their careers. The past, as L.P. Hartley wrote, 'is a foreign country: they do things differently there' (Hartley 1953: 9). Historians who want to defend Franklin must come to terms with the stubborn 'otherness' of the past and with the irrefutable fact that he was willing, even eager, to risk his life in search of the northwest passage. (Janice Cavell, Historical Section (PORH), Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada, 125 Sussex Drive, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0G2, Canada and Carleton University, 1125 Colonel By Drive, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1S 5B6).

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**THE FIRST PACIFIC WAR: BRITAIN AND RUSSIA, 1854–1856.** John D. Grainger. 2008. Woodbridge, Suffolk and Rochester, New York: The Boydell Press. xv + 207p, illustrated, hard cover. ISBN 978-1-84383-354-3. £50.

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There were two theatres of the 'Crimean' War, 1853–1856, that are of interest to readers of *Polar Record*. The first was the White Sea in which the British and French navies maintained a blockade of Russian ports, notably Archangelsk, interdicting trade and tying up military resources that would have been more useful in the area of the main hostilities. The other was the sub-Arctic northwest Pacific where the strategic situation facing the allies was much more complex as there was imperfectly understood geography, difficulties concerning sea ice, with which the allied commanders were largely unfamiliar, prob-

lems, actual and potential, with neutrals, notably China, Japan, which entered into treaties with the USA, Russia, and Britain in the period, and the USA itself which was adopting an expansive posture in the Pacific. Moreover, the allies were confronted by probably the most outstanding Russian commanders in the whole conflict.

The recent literature in English concerning the war in the second area, the subject of this book, is scanty. The seminal paper was John Stephan's 'The Crimean War in the far east' (Stephan 1969), and this was followed by sections in his important books entitled *Sakhalin* and *The Kuril Islands* (Stephan 1971, 1974), an analysis by Barry Gough of the only battle, that at Petropavlovsk/Kamchatsky in 1854 (Gough 1971: 108–122) together with a very few other papers (for example Stone and Crampton 1985; Stone 1992).

The present volume is the first attempt to present a coherent account of the whole episode and is thus to be warmly welcomed. The topic is dealt with chronologically with equal